

Breaking The Cycle Of Recidivism – Engaging The Future

Deputy Instructor – MERIT Program

David Bates

It is a good thing that Deputy David Bates is motivated by a strong desire to be involved in public service. Indeed, that was the driving impulse when he decided to go into law enforcement some 21 years ago in Los Angeles County. As a rookie he worked in the jails in Malibu for a while, then moved to Hollywood and got a strong taste of what it's like to deal with gangs, drugs, prostitutes and organized crime. Next he was assigned to work in public schools teaching drug education to youngsters from the 4th grade through high school. Then it was back to the jails to head the drug and alcohol rehabilitation program, but not just any rehab program.

"For 150 years," he points out, "the sheriff's department saw the jails as not just principally, but totally, a housing operation. Sheriff Baca decided to take a more holistic approach, especially for recidivists."

Given the fact that the jail system in LA County is the largest local one in the country, serving some 20,000 prisoners, making a change that makes a difference is significant, indeed. David's quiet voice brightens with excitement when he talks about how it works. "The bottom line," he explains, "is getting into the heart as well as the brain. When a man buys the idea that his job is to be a good husband, father and leader in the community, he's got a whole different outlook."

When the program began three years ago, the recidivism rate among substance abusers was a rocketing 70 percent; today that's been more than cut in half, to 30 percent. The method? Not what you'd expect. Holistic is definitely not an empty adjective. Included in the services are acupuncture, sessions with an addiction specialist, anger management, and parenting instruction.

This is, in fact, only one part of a larger program entitled MERIT, an acronym for MAXIMIZING EDUCATION REACHING INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION. It is operated in collaboration with the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District Adult Education, Corrections, the largest provider of correctional education for jail facilities in the US, which has been providing academic classes for jails in the area since 1973. Three rehabilitation programs are included:

Bridges to Recovery focuses on domestic violence intervention and recovery through which students are learning to evaluate their own abusive behavior as a gateway to creating recovery goals that show their will and motivation to change their actions and accept responsibility for future behavior.

Veterans Program is for incarcerated military veterans, who may have been charged with a wide variety of offenses, but share a



problem with substance abuse. The program includes services from other community organizations, such as the Veterans' Administration, US Vets and Volunteers of America.

IMPACT Program for substance abusers.

The three programs share a common focus, which is "to challenge the negative beliefs and behaviors that perpetuate personal and family dysfunction," and David is one of three instructors who together offer more than 30 years of experience in the development and implementation of education programs for inmates. Components of the curriculum include an exit plan, an alumni support group (which has evolved to include family members), and a program called TALK, which stands for Teaching and Loving Kids and deals with the parent/child relationship. In addition, students who have additional time to serve after they have completed their instruction may choose to stay on as mentors, student leaders, clerks or section leaders.

David proudly describes a program that continues weekly in a church after the formal instruction is completed and offers the former inmates the opportunity to bring their spouses. "This works," he asserts, "because they realize who and what they are."

And, yes, he admits there is resistance. Younger offenders are hard to convince, older ones often insist they've been down this road before. But the numbers speak for themselves, and Deputy David Bates knows that he's doing what he meant to – providing a vital public service.